



VIEW NORTH: CHAPTER 2, "THE LAND BETWEEN" CONTEXT MAP.



VIEW NORTH: THIS PHOTO LOOKS ACROSS LOWER GALILEE TO UPPER GALILEE FROM THE ARAB CHRISTIAN TOWN OF EILABUN AT THE EASTERN END OF THE BEIT NETOFA VALLEY.

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THE LAND BETWEEN

The title of this chapter is a phrase coined by Professor Jim Monson, who taught historical geography at the Jerusalem University College (formerly the Institute of Holy Land Studies) on Mount Zion. The title refers to Palestine as a land bridge between the continents of Asia and Africa. The rulers of both lands sought to enrich themselves by controlling the trade routes through Palestine, running in every direction (see “Jezreel Valley” in *Blessed Pilgrimage*, vol. 2). They also used it as a bridgehead to launch attacks on other nations. As the Scottish theologian George Adam Smith¹ explained, Palestine was

between two of the oldest homes of the human race. This made her a passage for the earliest intercourse and exchanges of civilisation. There is probably no older road in all the world than that which can still be used by caravans from the Euphrates to the Nile, through Damascus, Galilee, Esdraelon [Jezreel Valley], the Maritime Plain, and Gaza.²

Smith wrote in a day when the borders between the countries of the Middle East were open and merchant caravans traveled freely between Iran (Mesopotamia) and Egypt. The Bedouins in modern Israeli towns like Rumet Heib relate stories of their ancestors moving herds of camels between Iran and Egypt in the not-so-distant past. Rumet Heib sits at the western end of the Beit Netofa Valley on one of the ancient routes through Lower Galilee (see top photo on page 10).

Malik is one such man whose ancestral accounts might fill volumes. He lives in Rumet Heib and runs a restaurant from a Bedouin tent beside his home. Modernization and shifts in political boundaries have brought many changes, including adjustments in lifestyle, to the families of the Middle East.

HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

Today’s scholars use geography to help them interpret the biblical past. The study of historical geography emerged during the 1950s as a subdiscipline of geography and history. Thus the Israeli archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni (1919–1976) began his book *The Land of the Bible* with the following:



VIEW WEST: RUMET HEIB AT THE WESTERN END OF THE BEIT NETOFA VALLEY (CENTER LEFT). ALSO VISIBLE IS THE BIBLICAL SITE OF HANNATHON (CENTER; SEE JOSH. 19:14) ON THE MOUND ABOVE THE BUILDINGS.

The history of any land and people is influenced to a considerable degree by their geographical environment. This includes not only the natural features such as climate, soil, topography, etc., but also the geopolitical relationships with neighbouring areas. This is especially true for Palestine, a small and relatively poor country, which derives its main importance from its unique centralized location at the juncture of continents and a crossroads for the nations.³

In light of Aharoni's claim about the importance of Palestine's location between nations, God's promise to ancient Israel seems remarkable today, especially amid the ongoing political tensions between Israel and its neighbors. Here is God's promise:

BELOW: THE LACHISH RELIEF TELLS THE STORY OF THE ASSYRIAN VICTORY OVER THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH, INCLUDING ITS SIEGE OF LACHISH IN THE JUDEAN SHEPHELAH (SEE "JUDEAN SHEPHELAH" IN BLESSED PILGRIMAGE, VOL. 4).





VIEW WEST: THE TEMPLE MOUNT FROM THE MODEL OF JERUSALEM ON THE GROUNDS OF THE ISRAEL MUSEUM.

And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, *neither shall the sword go through your land.* (Lev. 26:6, emphasis added)

We better understand the wonder of God’s word against the backdrop of historical geography. The promise “neither shall the sword go through your land” is remarkable given the threat of militant nations on every side and the trade routes that crossed the land in every direction. But God’s promise came with conditions. The children of Israel were to “keep [His] sabbaths” and “reverence [His] sanctuary” (Lev. 26:2). Being chosen as a people was not enough to receive God’s protection without adhering to His laws and commandments. The Land Between became Israel’s testing ground of faith, where the children of Israel proved their devotion to God by obeying His commandments.

Consider, for example, the victories and defeats of the Maccabee family against Roman rule during the two hundred years leading up to Christ’s birth (see “Historical Sketch” in *Blessed Pilgrimage*, vol. 2). One hundred years of Jewish independence ended in 64 BC when the Roman general Pompey conquered all of Judea, including Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple. With the arrival of Jesus in Galilee one hundred years later, some Jews sought a Messiah who would deliver them as Judas Maccabeus had done. They were not seeking the spiritual deliverance from sin and suffering Jesus offered. After all, wasn’t that the purpose of animal sacrifice in the temple? For these Jews, the message of the higher law pronounced by Jesus to repent and come unto Him, and love your enemies too, fell on deaf ears.

Other Jews, like the faithful Simeon, recognized what God had “revealed to him by the Holy Spirit” when the infant Jesus was brought to the temple by His parents. God told Simeon that he “would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (Luke 2.26). Holding Jesus in his arms, Simeon prayed:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people. (Luke 2:29–31)

The idea that Jesus was born in a stable to humble parents from Galilee did not keep Simeon from recognizing what he had learned from prophets through the revelations of the Holy Spirit to his soul. In Jesus, he recognized the long-awaited Messiah.



VIEW NORTHEAST: THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN FROM MT. CARMEL FACING LOWER GALILEE. SNOW-CAPPED MT. HERMON IS JUST VISIBLE (TOP CENTER).

A LAND DIVIDED

Two challenges confronted the children of Israel. First, Canaan was a land occupied by other people, “seven nations greater and mightier than [Israel].” When Moses said in his heart, “These nations are more than I; how can I dispossess them?” God answered, “Thou shalt not be afraid of them: but shalt well *remember* what the Lord thy God did unto Pharaoh, and unto all Egypt” (Deut. 7:1, 17–18, emphasis added).

Remembering what God has done for you is the key to successfully confronting every difficulty, no matter how challenging or large the problem may be. Reflecting on Israel’s rescue from Egyptian bondage is appropriate today, just as it was when God assured Moses that He would help him and his people overcome the challenges they would face upon entering the promised land.

The Hebrew word for help (*ezer*) has an interesting connotation in the Hebrew Bible. The authors used it only twenty-one times, mostly in military contexts where God describes Himself as Israel’s “help” or *ezer*. For example, “O Israel, trust thou in the Lord: he is their help [*ezer*] and their *shield*” (Psalms 115:9, emphasis added). And in Deuteronomy, He says the following:

Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord, the *shield* of thy help [*ezer*], and who is the *sword* of thy excellency! and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places. (Deut. 33:29, emphasis added)

Moses and Zipporah named one of their sons *Eliezer* (my God is help), “for the God of my father, said he, was mine help [*ezer*], and delivered me from the *sword* of Pharaoh” (Ex. 18:4, emphasis added). In these verses, we read about swords, spears, shields, deliverance, and the promise of victory, associating God’s strength with His help (*ezer*). It is about delivering the people of Israel from their enemies, just as God can deliver us.

As you probably know from personal experience, God’s help doesn’t always mean the kind of deliverance Israel experienced coming out of Egypt. Sometimes the best support we can receive is the strength to endure, enabling us to learn lessons that eventually define who we are and who we should strive to be, the people God wants us to become.



VIEW EAST: THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN FROM MT. CARMEL FACING LOWER GALILEE AND THE NAZARETH MOUNTAIN RANGE. MT. MOREH IS ALSO VISIBLE (TOP RIGHT).

Israel's second challenge was the land itself. Its diverse and complicated topography worked against unification. The "hills and valleys" separated it into independent districts, each with their own rulers. Thus, when Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground, many small kingdoms existed side by side in Canaan. The land required a robust and well-organized government to conquer its enemies and unify its people.

We know a lot about the kingdoms of Canaan in the centuries leading up to the conquest from the Amarna letters, an archive of clay tablets discovered in Upper Egypt at el-Amarna at the end of the nineteenth century. They shed light on Egyptian relations with the rulers of Canaan and surrounding countries. For example, the tablets mention Lib'ayu of Shechem (modern Nablus) and Abdi-Heba of Jerusalem. The letters also refer to a near-eastern people known as the Habiru, which may be a reference to the Israelites as Hebrews, a subject debated by scholars today.

A LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He said, "I have come down to deliver [Israel] out of the hands of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8). "Flowing with milk and honey" was a proverbial expression meaning Canaan was fruitful and productive. To receive the land's bounties, His people were required to "keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to *fear* him" (Deut. 8:6, emphasis added).

Keeping God's commandments was not enough, however. He expected His people to *walk* in His ways, to *love* as He loves, and to *do* as He does to family, friends, and neighbors. They were to "fear" God, or honor and revere Him as children do their parents.

After God told Moses to "speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy," He admonished them regarding parents, using the same Hebrew verb for *fear* used in the Deuteronomy passage above: "Ye shall fear [*tirau*] every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:3). Fearing God was the condition if the children of Israel hoped to prosper in the land and enjoy its bounties. God's promise of prosperity was sure, but it required devotion and obedience to Him (see Deut. 7:11–14). Nothing less would do.



A VERY OLD OLIVE TREE TWO MONTHS AFTER THE OCTOBER HARVEST. THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN ON THE EDGE OF SHEPHERD'S FIELD NORTHEAST OF BETHLEHEM.

God described the fruitfulness of Canaan using agricultural products the land produced in abundance, sometimes referred to as the “seven species” in the Bible. God told Moses that Canaan was “a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of [olive trees], and honey.” He promised him

BELOW: A RIPENING SPRING FIG ON A TREE NEAR ANCIENT BEERSHEBA.



“a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness” (Deut. 8:8–9).

The story of Sinuhe is an Egyptian tale about a man who fled his kingdom and lived abroad before returning to Egypt shortly before his death. The story is interesting on several levels, but mainly because Sinuhe was contemporary with Abraham’s son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, and because he provided a detailed description of the produce of a land he called Retenu, the ancient Egyptian name for Canaan and Syria. His list of products—figs, grapes, wine, honey, olives, fruit, barley, emmer-wheat, and cattle—is strikingly similar to the list in Deuteronomy 8:8 and gives us another view of the land as encountered first by the Patriarchs and later by the children of Israel after their captivity in Egypt.

THE RAIN OF HEAVEN

Canaan was unlike Egypt, whose flat lands were watered annually by the Nile River overflowing its banks. God told the children of Israel that Canaan was “a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven: A land which the Lord thy God careth for: the eyes of

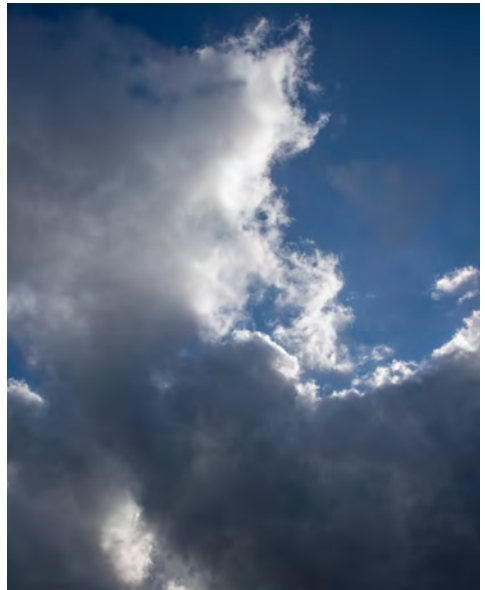


BARLEY TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE SPRING HARVEST. THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN NEAR THE YARMUK RIVER VALLEY SOUTHEAST OF THE SEA OF GALILEE.

the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year” (Deut. 11:11–12). God promised to give them “the rain of your land in his due season, the first [or early] rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn [or grain], and thy wine, and thine oil” (Deut. 11:13–14) if they would hearken unto His commandments, “to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 11:17; see also Isa. 5:6 and James 5:7).

The early rains fell during October and November to prepare the land for planting after a long, hot summer. The latter rains fell in February and March, just before planting began. Both were crucial for a productive harvest. The rain fell mostly along the coast, in Galilee, and on the western side of the central hills (Judea and Samaria).

The Canaanites worshiped Baal as the god of rain and thunder. George Adam Smith explained how they saw droughts as evidence of his wrath: Baal “had, therefore, to be propitiated by the horrible sacrifices of manhood, feminine purity, and child life, which have made their religions so revolting.”²⁴ On whom would the Israelites rely for the blessings of heaven? Would they look to the god of the Canaanites, imitating their wicked, pagan forms of worship? Or would they rely on Jehovah, keeping His laws and commandments and accepting His plea to “love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might?” (Deut. 6:6). Would they *remember* Him who freed them from captivity, brought them out of Egypt, and protected them from Pharaoh’s armies with His incredible power? Would they *remember* the parting of the waters and the crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground?



GOD’S TESTING GROUND OF FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

Canaan was a land of many challenges, which enabled the children of Israel to demonstrate their trust in God while seizing upon His promise of protection and prosperity. Opposition is crucial to growing faith,



VIEW NORTHWEST: THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN ABOVE MT. TURAN OVERLOOKING THE BEIT NETOFA VALLEY, ONE OF THE ROUTES THROUGH LOWER GALILEE THAT TESTED ISRAEL'S FAITH.

BELOW (VIEW NORTHEAST): LOWER GALILEE LOOKING TOWARD UPPER GALILEE. THE TERRAIN OF THIS REGION PUSHED THE ROUTES THROUGH THE VALLEYS OF LOWER GALILEE.





VIEW EAST: THE TRAIL IN THIS PHOTO FOLLOWS NAHAL KEZIV IN UPPER GALILEE. THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN BELOW THE CRUSADER CASTLE OF MONTFORT ABOUT 11 MILES (18 KILOMETERS) EAST OF NAHARIYA ON ISRAEL'S NORTHERN COAST.

developing character, and acquiring godly attributes like patience and love. Trusting God brings peace and even joy during trials and tribulations.

For these and other reasons, all concerning the personal growth and happiness of His children, God brought the children of Israel into the Land Between. He brought them to Canaan in particular because He “loved [them], and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto [their] fathers . . . to redeem [them] . . . from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.” He brought them to show that “he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love and keep his commandments to a thousand generations” (Deut. 7:8–9).

The Canaanites worshiped dumb idols to satisfy the gods and avoid their displeasure. They saw opposition in the form of droughts, earthquakes, and other natural disasters as expressions of Baal’s displeasure with them. Their gods demanded loyalty or else, which gave the Canaanites an excuse to double down on perverted forms of worship they falsely believed would make the ground fertile and benefit their crops. Thus they engaged in debauched fertility rites condemned by Israel’s prophets.

GOD’S GRACE

Before the children of Israel arrived in the promised land, God brought them through Sinai, where they received His law. He required obedience as an expression of their love for

BELOW: REPLICA OF BERTEL THORVALDSEN’S MARBLE STATUE THE CHRISTUS.





VIEW NORTH: LANDSAT 9 SATELLITE SCENE OF THE SINAI PENINSULA. THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL WANDERED FORTY YEARS IN SINAI, SUBSISTING ON WATER, MANNAH, AND QUAIL.

Him. It wasn't about *doing* so much as it was about *becoming*, which obedience to His laws and the sacrifice of His Son made possible.⁵ God knows what brings happiness to His children. He knows what enables them to become their best through the enabling power of Christ's Atonement, something we commonly refer to as the "grace of Christ." Access to His grace requires trust, obedience, sacrifice, and faith in Him and in the purpose of His laws, which guide us home to our Heavenly Parents.⁶ Elder Uchtdorf described what God has given us:

Our Father in Heaven has given us, His children, much more than any mortal mind can comprehend. Under His direction the Great Jehovah created this wondrous world we live in. God the Father watches over us, fills our hearts with breathtaking joy, brightens our darkest hours with blessed peace, distills upon our minds precious truths, shepherds us through times of distress, rejoices when we rejoice, and answers our righteous petitions. He offers to His children the promise of a glorious and infinite existence and has provided a way for us to progress in knowledge and glory until we receive a fulness of joy. He has promised us all that He has. If all that is not enough reason to love our Heavenly Father, perhaps we can learn from the words of the Apostle John, who said, "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19).⁷

Thus, as Elder Uchtdorf taught, we keep God's commandments not because we fear His displeasure but because we love Him and His Son, the great Jehovah. His laws, ordinances, and covenants teach us about Christ; they show us how to avoid the misery that attends worldly ways; they show us the path to everlasting peace and happiness as we travel the wilderness of life.

ENDNOTES

1 George Adam Smith (1856–1942) was a Scottish historian, theologian, and preacher. He traveled extensively in Syria and Egypt before publishing his findings and observations in *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (1894; revised 1931). His descriptions of the land contribute greatly to our understanding of Palestine in the nineteenth century.

2 George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (Collins, 1973), 50.

3 Yohanan Aharoni, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 2nd ed. (Westminster Press, 1979), 3. Aharoni was chairman of the Department of Near East Studies and chairman of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel-Aviv University.

4 Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 153.

5 Dallin H. Oaks, “Kingdoms of Glory,” *Liabona* (Nov. 2023), Gospel Library. “The Apostle Paul taught that the Lord’s teachings and commandments were given that we may all attain ‘the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.’ That process requires far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not even enough to be convinced of the gospel; we must act so that we are converted by it. In contrast to other preaching, which teaches us to know something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to become something. From such teachings we conclude that the Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have done. It is based on the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have become. We qualify for eternal life through a process of conversion. As used here, this word of many meanings signifies a profound change of nature. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.” See also Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, (Nov. 2000), Gospel Library.

6 Bonnie H. Cordon, “Beloved Daughters,” *Liabona* (Nov. 2019), Gospel Library. “You are all remarkable young women. You are unique, each with your own gifts and experiences yet alike in a very important and eternal way. You are literally the spirit daughters of Heavenly Parents, and nothing can separate you from Their love and the love of your Savior. As you draw closer to Him, even taking the smallest baby steps forward, you will discover the lasting peace that settles into your soul as a faithful disciple of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Russell M. Nelson, “Come, Follow Me,” *Liabona* (May 2019), Gospel Library. “My dear brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ invites us to take the covenant path back home to our Heavenly Parents and be with those we love. He invites us to ‘come, follow me.’”

Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Liabona* (Nov. 1995), Gospel Library. “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”

7 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Love of God,” *Liabona* (Nov. 2009), Gospel Library. “God knows you. You are His child. He loves you. Even when you think that you are not lovable, He reaches out to you. This very day—every day—He reaches out to you, desiring to heal you, to lift you up, and to replace the emptiness in your heart with an abiding joy. He desires to sweep away any darkness that clouds your life and fill it with the sacred and brilliant light of His unending glory. . . . The love God speaks of is the kind that enters our hearts when we awake in the morning, stays with us throughout the day, and swells in our hearts as we give voice to our prayers of gratitude at evening’s end.” See also Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” *Liabona* (Nov. 2018), Gospel Library.